



word *of* mouth

SUMMER 2023

FOOD BANK
OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

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OF WESTERN
MASSACHUSETTS

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Dear Friends,

Local farms have been in the news a lot this summer given the relentless rain and destructive flooding. Across the Commonwealth, current estimates are that 2,000 acres of farmland on 75 farms were impacted, totaling \$15 million in losses. Our heart goes out especially to local farmers, some of whom have had devastating losses of crops as rivers overflowed into nearby fields, including the fields of our long-time partner Mountain View Farm CSA (Easthampton) and our newest partners, Joe Czajkowski Farm (Hadley) and Atlas Farm (Deerfield). All three partners also lease land on our two Food Bank Farms in Hadley. We are relieved to report no significant crop damage has occurred on either Food Bank Farm (foodbankwma.org/learn/food-bank-farm/).

Ever-changing weather events, particularly in the last three years in a row, pose a significant threat to the livelihoods of our neighbors who have made it their life's work to grow food for communities in our region and across the Commonwealth. Our farmers have been some of our strongest allies, providing about one million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables every year to households facing food insecurity. We are lucky to be surrounded by such beautiful farmland and the amazing people who grow fresh local food for us. We depend on them to carry out our mission and they depend on you to buy local food.

On this note, I am pleased to announce the successful sale of our Hatfield building to Meyers Produce, a woman-owned New England fresh produce distributor and trucking company that has been renting warehouse space in Hadley for several years. As part of our capital campaign goal to move to our new home in Chicopee, the Food Bank Board of Directors decided that an extension of our mission is to sell our Hatfield facility to Meyers Produce that will expand markets for local farmers and strengthen our region's farm economy.

Meyers Produce has a longstanding commitment to bolstering access to fresh farm produce from Western Massachusetts. With this strategic move, Meyers Produce is taking a significant step towards expanding the purchase of food from local growers and producers, and then transporting and reselling it to businesses throughout the region and beyond.

We are also looking forward to sharing resources at our respective new facilities, including cross docking and temporary storage that will facilitate Food Bank deliveries to its member food pantries and meal sites in Hampshire and Franklin Counties. This relationship is one of many ways in which the Food Bank will uphold its commitment to our food assistance network of 172 local food pantries, meal sites and shelters that operate in all four counties of Western Massachusetts.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Morehouse". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial 'A'.

Andrew Morehouse
Executive Director, Food Bank of Western Massachusetts

The Red Door on Hope Street

A glimpse into the daily operations of Stone Soup Café, a Food Bank partner and community meal site located in Franklin County

On any given Friday afternoon at Stone Soup Café in Greenfield, a dedicated team of staff and volunteers are preparing to feed 500 to 600 people at their Saturday community meal. It is a massive effort, with roughly 25 volunteers assisting staff for ingredient preparation on Friday and over 50 pitching in to help with cooking, packing, serving, and delivery on Saturday afternoon.

The Head Chef for this week's meal was Erika McGee. The organization has played a pivotal role for McGee, who readily calls the community at Stone Soup her family. "I have recently moved into a transition to independence," said McGee, "and Stone Soup Café's presence in my life has helped tremendously to make the transition easier by allowing me to be a volunteer and providing the Culinary Institute of which I am a graduate of. I was the Chef of the Day for Juneteenth this year where I customized and helped prepare the community meal— finally realizing a dream of mine to cook for a large crowd—and lastly being voted onto the Board of Directors."

With local businesses still experiencing staffing shortages in the wake of the pandemic, Stone Soup, which is a Food Bank member meal site,



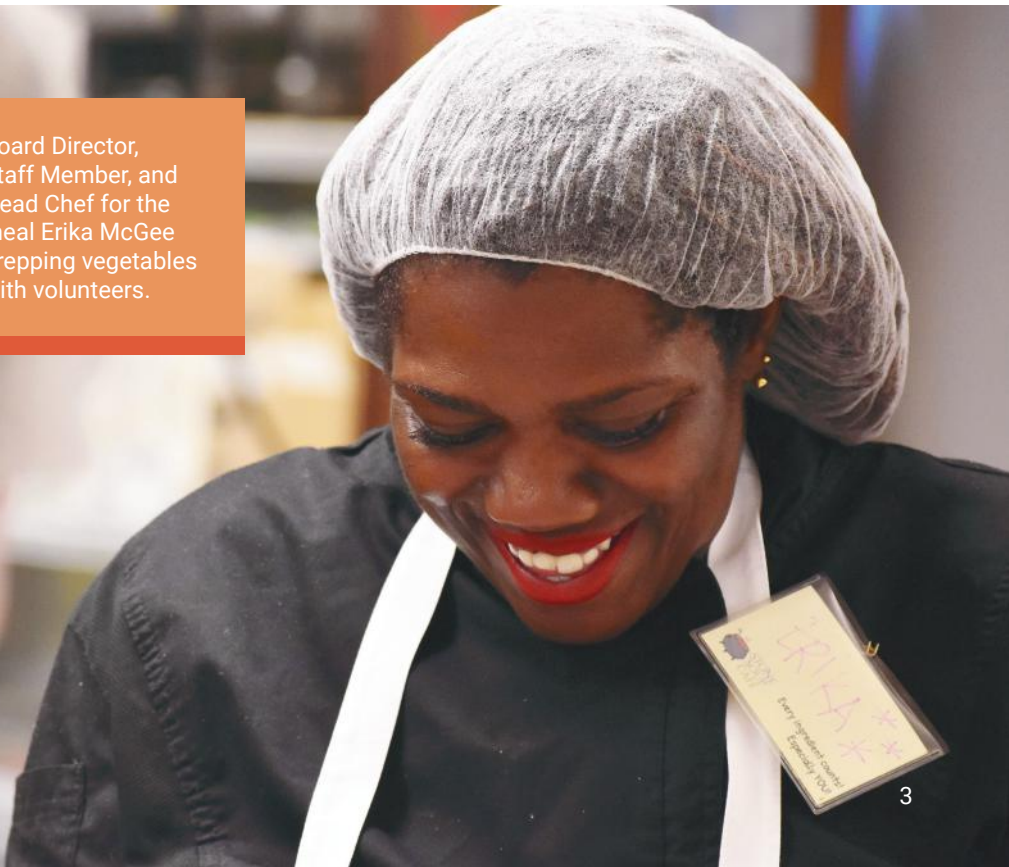
Staff member Erik Rudder and volunteer Melanie Highlander preparing watermelon salad.

seized the opportunity to take their training a step further by creating their own culinary school. All volunteers with the café receive on-site training in food safety and kitchen skills. The program is not only free for participants, but it also compensates them for attending, opening new pathways both at Stone Soup and beyond in the burgeoning restaurant scene in Greenfield.

The quality of their food is paramount—the result of Co-Director Kirsten Levitt’s passion for nutrition, quality ingredients, food safety, and flavor. She will not serve something if she isn’t 100% confident and avoids processed or unhealthy ingredients. The Café is also dedicated to making the food as universally accommodating to dietary restrictions as possible, maintaining a gluten free facility and offering vegan options at every meal. Levitt’s crown jewel in her kitchen is her seasoning stockpile, an entire section of cabinets dedicated to taste. “This is how you make food taste good,” says Levitt, “We’re building flavor. We make everything we can from scratch.”

After each meal, Stone Soup ensures nothing goes to waste. Their free store is open at the same time as their meal distributions to create a one-stop pickup of food and sanitary products. They use 100% compostable packaging down to the wrapper on the compostable utensils. At the end of the day, any food left over is given to the Franklin County Community Meals Program for their Greenfield meal distributions later in the week. Coordinating the many people, processes, and partnerships that surround Stone Soup isn’t easy. Their tireless work pays off. In 10 years, they have never missed a weekend meal. “The

Board Director,
Staff Member, and
Head Chef for the
meal Erika McGee
prepping vegetables
with volunteers.





LEFT: Stone Soup Café Co-Director Ashley Kramer unpacking orange juice to go into the Free Store refrigerator. RIGHT: Stone Soup Café Co-Director Kirsten Levitt prepping sheet pans for gluten-free red velvet cake.

practice of being in community is actually a practice,” said Program Director Jansyn Thaw. “It takes work.”

McGee agrees, explaining, “Socializing is an essential need for human beings. Family provides a strong support system in times of distress, giving you physical and emotional help. One can be more confident to pursue their goals and dreams when it’s known someone who’s got your back and will be happy with your success. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity given to me by the members of the organization. Moreover, I am an entrepreneur, and as such, often called a dreamer. “DREAMERS” are always compelled to take leaps of faith. Well, I am a DREAMER, so I finally leapt.”

Before the pandemic, Stone Soup was serving sit-down meals to around 100 people in the basement of the All Souls Church in downtown Greenfield. Now, with their grab-and-go program serving five to six times as many people, their space is limiting their ability to return to a friendlier, more community-oriented eating environment. They are hopeful for the future and are committed to grow and evolve with the city around them. The Food Bank is proud to partner with Stone Soup and our 171-strong Food Assistance Network across all four counties of Western Massachusetts. Together, we build a better future for our communities.

For more about Stone Soup Café, visit their website at thestonesoupcafe.org

Thank You!

The following businesses, organizations and foundations made a gift of \$1,000 or more between April 1, 2023 and June 30, 2023:

All States Asphalt, Inc.	Northfield Mount Hermon School
Arbella Insurance Group	Retail Business Services
Bank of America Matching Gifts	RISE Holdings Inc.
Coldham & Hartman Architects	Starbucks Coffee Company
Community Health Charities	Talcott Resolution
Day Lumber Company	The Heirloom Collective
Development Associates	The Janey Fund
Estate of David V Rowland	Tree House Brewing Company, Inc.
Feeding America	USDA
Five College Movers, LLC	Wakefern Food Corporation
Grace Episcopal Church	Western Area Mass. Dietetic Association
Greylock Federal Credit Union	Women's Benevolent Society
INSA	
Instacart	
Marcel Investment Trust	

The following businesses are the top ten donors of food between April 1, 2023 and June 30, 2023:

Big Y	Target
Stop and Shop	Cumberland Farms
Coca-Cola	Costco
Performance Food Group	Hannaford Supermarkets
Walmart	Lineage Logistics



Taking On Transp

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In June, the Food Bank and its partners in the Western Massachusetts Transportation Advocacy Network (WMTAN) hosted their second forum to discuss solutions to improve public transportation in the western half of the Commonwealth. Years of research and personal testimonials have documented that food affordability is only one of many obstacles for families facing food insecurity— they also must be able to travel to and from stores with affordable, healthy options.

For residents who don't drive or have access to a vehicle, and don't live within a walkable radius of a grocery store, planning trips around limited public transportation availability can be a major challenge. There are three public Regional Transit Authorities (RTA) that operate in Western



Transportation Equity



Hosts second
Advocacy Forum in
connections and
creative solutions

Massachusetts, the PVTA serving Hampden and Hampshire Counties, the FRTA serving Franklin County, and the BRTA, serving Berkshire County. Unfortunately, state funding for public transportation is vastly unequal. The MBTA receives 93% of state funding and the other fifteen RTAs across the Commonwealth must split the remaining 7%, rendering public transportation serving the population outside of Metro Boston woefully inadequate.

Speakers at the forum discussed a wide range of topics from the FRTA free fare program to the impact of subsidized rides for elders in very rural areas of Berkshire County.

Other presentations included The Quaboag Connector—the first micro-transit pilot in our region (and Worcester County) that sets the bar high for what success looks like to serve a rural population with on-demand publicly subsidized transportation. This concept has continued to evolve in the area with the new Great Barrington Micro-Transit Project, serving as a great example of how local advocacy and passion can create change to improve access to food and many other essential services. Craig’s Doors Fare Access Program in Amherst is the first in the nation to provide free bus passes to people experiencing homelessness, underscoring how increased freedom of movement enables people to apply for jobs, visit family and friends, access food, and much more.

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission also presented the preliminary version of a mapping tool (commissioned by the Food Bank and funded by grants from T4MA and Feeding America) that provides a bird’s-eye view of public transportation routes in the region and their proximity to grocery stores, places of employment, higher education, and medical care. The tool is helpful for advocates who study transportation issues and could eventually be used by those relying on local public transportation to plan their trips.



ABOVE: Attendees of the WMTAN Forum discussing the day's topics at a break in the presentations.

LEFT: Laura Sylvester, Food Bank Public Policy Manager, providing opening remarks about the importance of public transportation equity and its relationship to the Food Bank's mission.

RIGHT: Representatives from Hilltown Community Development presenting on investments in infrastructure in rural areas.

BELOW: Eric J. Gonzales Ph.D. of UMass Amherst presenting a MassDOT Focus Group Study of Food Access in the Connecticut River Valley.



The WMTAN formed after the first Transportation Forum, organized by the Food Bank in 2019 to highlight the critical importance of investing in improved public transportation to achieve food security. Led by Public Policy Manager Laura Sylvester, the WMTAN meets virtually monthly and is open to anyone with an interest in transportation policy. “The original idea for the group was to bring together RTA employees, planners, advocates, transportation users, and legislators to highlight the innovative work that’s already being done in Western Massachusetts, to share best practices and to leverage our voices in advocating for better funding,” Sylvester says. “This latest Forum brought our work to a wider audience and is helping to spread the word.”

A special thank you to our sponsors, T4MA and Instacart, for making this event possible.

To learn more about the topics discussed, an agenda and full recording of the event can be found on our website at foodbankwma.org/WMTAN

A New Era of Teaching Nutrition

How the Food Bank's Chicopee facility will expand nutrition programming in the building and beyond

This September, the Food Bank will be moving into its larger, greener food distribution center and headquarters in Chicopee. In addition to increasing the Food Bank's ability to receive, store and distribute more healthy food, the facility will greatly improve our ability to offer workshops on food safety and healthy eating to individuals who want to learn how to prepare healthy meals on a budget.

For the past year, Nutrition Coordinator Meredith Starr has been taking her workshops and cooking demos on the road to community centers, senior centers, and farmers' markets. These events have been successful despite the constraints of the teaching spaces available. "Not all locations are the same," Meredith explained. "Some of them have a full kitchen that we can use which is great, but then there are some that are just a room—there's not even a microwave. So, we must bring the microwave, the hot plate, the dishware. And this is fine for now, we are prepared for it, but once we get into our new space, we'll have everything right there and that will make things much easier."

A new 1,600 square foot Community Room in Chicopee will increase the nutrition team's capacity to host in-house workshops and create opportunities for guest cooks and other contributors. A specialized camera array will be installed over the kitchen's prep and cooking areas for live streaming and quality recording. Large screen monitors will give in-person audiences a bird's eye view of cooking demonstrations. From feedback received last year after releasing *The Flexible Pantry Cookbook*, our nutrition team learned that expanding our reach beyond those who can physically access the building is essential to facilitate more equitable access to Food Bank resources for neighbors in all four counties of Western Massachusetts.



Clay Gregory

Nutrition Coordinator Meredith Starr presenting about the importance of protein in a healthy diet and how to prepare common proteins safely at the Hatfield Senior Center.

These workshops are important as poor nutrition often comes hand in hand with food insecurity. Cheap, quick meals are often the easiest options for people on a budget or with limited time and space to prepare food. They are usually heavily processed and lack important nutrients. Diet-related disease is a major contributor to poor health, which is why the Food Bank is committed to providing healthy food for households facing food insecurity. Food safety has also evolved considerably in the last decade, making it important to pass on the latest information about best practices to prevent food-borne illness.

Nutrition and cooking workshops provide individuals of all ages with knowledge about healthy eating habits, understanding food labels, portion sizes, and the importance of a balanced diet. This knowledge empowers individuals to make informed food choices even with limited resources, reducing reliance on processed or convenience foods which may be less nutritious.

Here is one of our nutrition team's latest recipes, designed to be an easy, protein-packed snack for those on the go!

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No-Bake Peanut Butter Oatmeal Squares

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup peanut butter
- ½ cup honey
- 3 cups rolled oats (instant or regular)
- ½ cup of raisins (or other dried fruit)

DIRECTIONS (MAKES 16):

Line an 8x8 pan with foil. Spray lightly with non-stick spray. Melt peanut butter and honey together until smooth. You can do this by microwaving both in a microwave-safe bowl for one minute, then checking and stirring. If it is not easy to stir together, put it back in the microwave for another minute. Alternatively, heat on a stove top until mixed.

Next, stir in oats and raisins until coated. Press evenly into pan with your hands or form the mixture into balls. Refrigerate until cool, cut into squares, and enjoy!





Volunteers at the Cultivating for Community parcel, June, 2023.

2023 Floods in Western Mass.



Governor Healey announcing the Massachusetts Farm Resiliency Fund at Food Bank partner Mountain View Farm in Easthampton.

During this difficult time, we urge the community to consider supporting local farms seeking recovery assistance in the coming months. Massachusetts Governor Healy recently announced the establishment of the Massachusetts Farm Resiliency Fund, which will be set up in partnership with the United Way of Central Massachusetts. The public is urged to donate to it here:

unitedwaycm.org/farmfund/



Governor Healey discussing the effects of flooding in Western Massachusetts with Senator Jo Commerford at the Resiliency Fund announcement.

OUR ANNUAL REPORT IS ONLINE



Thank you to all our donors who continue to support our mission.



We've published our Fiscal Year 2022 Annual Report online including a list of individual, corporate, institutional, and food donors. Please visit foodbankwma.org/AR2022

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